

# Low Test Scores + High Retention Rates

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## More Dropouts

by  
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The latest efforts in reform and accountability, most of which are replays of misguided efforts enacted in the early 1980s, include once again the use of required minimum standardized test scores to end the practice of social promotion. Greater reliance is being placed on the use of single test scores in making all or a large part of the retention decision (Sengupta 1997), despite the overwhelming consensus in the educational literature that retention of elementary and middle school students often produces negative results in academic achievement (Holmes 1989; Holmes and Matthews 1984; Holmes and Saturday 2000). Following their long-term study of the effort in Chicago to eliminate social promotion, Nagaoka and Roderick (2004, 36) reported outcomes that replicate earlier findings in the literature—that is, what small gains might be obtained in the third grade by retention are eradicated by the second year following retention and “results for the sixth grade are more negative.”

### How **Retention Rates** Compare

Part of the reason for current reform efforts in this area is the belief that U.S. students are not stacking up well in international comparisons. An estimated 15 to 19 percent of U.S.

**Table 1. Annual Retention Rates for Year 2000 for All Elementary Grades\***

Country	Retention Rate
Norway	0.0%
Japan	0.0%
Denmark	0.0%
Sweden	0.0%
United Kingdom	0.0%
Italy	0.3%
Finland	0.5%
Austria	1.5%
Ireland	1.6%
Switzerland	1.7%
Germany	1.8%
France	4.8%
United States	Estimated 15.0–19.0%
Togo	24.0%
Congo	24.9%
Rwanda	36.1%
Chad	53.9%

\*All data come from UNESCO (2003/4) except for the U.S. number which is an AFT (1997) estimate.

students are retained in grade each year (American Federation of Teachers 1997; Jimerson 2003), and about 22 percent of eighth graders have been retained at least once (Siegel and Bruno 1986). Countries with which

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we like to compare ourselves retain far fewer. Japan, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and the United Kingdom retain none of their elementary students (UNESCO 2003/4). Germany retains fewer than 2 percent of its students over their elementary careers. It is the undeveloped countries, like Rwanda, Congo, Togo, and Chad, that exceed the rate of retention in the United States (see Table 1).

### The **Dangers** of High Retention

One danger of the high retention rates is that large gains in district-wide test scores sometimes are obtained, encouraging many individuals to believe wrongly that the policy has been successful (Owens and Ranick 1977). When large numbers of students are retained in grade, large numbers of children are compared the following year to a younger norm group. The next grade also scores higher because low scorers are kept back. Though district scores may go up, what is lost in these comparisons is what happens to individual children.

The literature is unanimous in its linking of retention to dropping out. Grissom and Shepard (1989), using data on 117,612 students, calculated that after accounting for achievement, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, a single retention was related to an 18 to 28 percent increase in the chance of dropping out. Eide and Showalter (1999) found a similar relationship between retention and dropping out after controlling for variables such as age at school entry, parental education, family income, urban/rural community type, and region of the country.



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Rumberger (1995) calculated that middle school students were 11 times more likely to drop out of school if they had been retained, while Roderick (1995) calculated that one grade retention increased the risk of dropping out by 40 to 50 percent, and being two grades behind increased the risk by 90 percent. She claimed that three aspects of retention combine to increase the risk of dropping out: (1) retention in grade is not effective as a remediation strategy; (2) retention is seen as a strong message that the school and teacher see the student as a failure; and (3) retention makes a child older than his or her new grade peers. Byrd, Weitzman, and Auinger (1997) reported that children who were a year older than their classmates were more likely to display extreme behavior problems.

Whereas grade retention is associated with increased rates of behavior problems in children and adolescents, simply being older than others in one's class, without experiencing grade retention, also is associated with increased rates of behavior problems, most noticeably among adolescents. These data suggest that latent behavioral outcomes may result from delaying children's school entry.

### The Error of Student Accountability

Though well-meaning individuals are looking to high-stakes testing results for promotion as a means of ensuring that all students learn, retaining students "has a much greater impact

on minority and poor youths than on majority, middle-class children. It decreases educational opportunity, and it makes opportunities less equal among groups" (Hauser 1999, 64). Standardized test results should be used for identifying areas in the curriculum that need improvement, not for holding students accountable.

As the late Senator Paul D. Wellstone (2000, 8) put it, "Making students accountable for test scores works well on a bumper sticker and it allows many politicians to look good by saying that they will not tolerate failure. But it represents a hollow promise. Far from improving education, high-stakes testing marks a major retreat from fairness, from accuracy, from quality, and from equity."

### What Can Be Done?

Retention of students in grade is estimated to cost the country on average about \$10 billion per year. More cost effective would be to increase educational resources to improve student performance and eliminate the need for retention (McCollum et al. 1999).

Proven alternatives to retention exist. Among other effective ways to assist the struggling learner are systematic individual student plans and instruction, individual assistance, and the use of frequent assessment of progress to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of the learner. In short, what we should be doing is providing the assistance most boards of education policies are willing to provide after retention *before*

retention, instead of flunking those children. ■

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